HOW TO READ DANTE.

I have been requested by the Reverend Director of the Cathedral Library Reading Circle to outline a course of reading on Dante. Dante is so many-sided it is difficult to outline a single course that will compass all phases of his genius; the tastes of the readers and the extent of their previous readings will go far towards determining the line of studies to be pursued.

It is refreshing and encouraging to see a Catholic Reading Circle take up the study of Dante. Such a circle, if in earnest, has already gone far beyond the stage of the frivolous and the amusing in its readings. It has entered the domain of serious study. All the well-known and recognized Dante societies in the United States have been organized and are flourishing under non-Catholic auspices. It is high time that a Catholic Dante society should be organized. Dante was Catholic in his life; he is Catholic in his teachings; in his broadest influence he is thoroughly Catholic. He is ours by every right and title. In his marvelous poem he has embodied Catholic philosophy and Catholic theology. There is no phase of Catholic thought that does not find expression in those sublime pages. Every soul with a conviction will thrill responsive to some one or other note in his sacred song.

I.

Volumes have been written to prove Dante a heretic teaching the esoteric doctrines of the Cathari, Paterini and Albigenses. Men have found in his very orthodoxy a cloak to conceal the heresy beneath. The praises he has for Mary ever Virgin, are translated into blasphemous laudation of the mother-church of the Albigenses. Volumes have been written to prove him a Mazzini of the thirteenth century, a hater of the priesthood, the Church, the Pope, and the Catholic religion. Volumes have been written to prove him the Luther of his day. Volumes have been written to make him the propagator of nearly every fanciful theory that could enter the brain of man. In the perusal of all such volumes the student of Dante is only following will-o'-the-wisps rushing rapidly to some quagmire, in which he becomes enmeshed.

That Dante should have interpreters representing so many phases of opinion, only proves how far above the reach of ordinary intelligence he sits in the serene region of thought and song, whither only a favored few can travel. His *Divina Commedia* is a work to be read with awe and wonder and admiration. It represents the most profound study and the most intense concentration of the highest form of human genius. The scientific precision that enters into its wording, the mathematical accuracy with which it is constructed, the marvelous grasp of subject by which the poet, in so many lines calculated beforehand, was enabled to condense

thoughts tender and thoughts severe, thoughts abstruse and thoughts of daily life, thoughts historical and thoughts political—all embodied in words having at least two meanings, a literal and a figurative—these are traits that confront us upon a superficial reading of the poem. Is it any wonder that men should find it so difficult to measure the vastness of Dante's genius?

II.

In studying Dante, one is studying the whole genius and spirit of the Middle Ages. In his great poem rightly interpreted, one has the key to these ages. It is the poet's mission to embalm in his verse the noblest and best aspirations of his day and generation. This Dante has done in a manner to challenge the admiration of all times, and to know the poet one must know the age in which the poet lived. Dante is a sealed book to any man not familiar with the history, the thought, and the politics of the thirteenth century. The student, before touching the writings of the great poet, should first familiarize himself with the history of his times. He should form unto himself a clear conception of the relations of Church and state, of the Holy Roman Empire, of the universities, of the literary and artistic growth and development of that period. The outline of Church history sketched by Darras or Alzog will be of service to him; Bryce's *Holy Roman Empire* he will find to be useful in throwing light upon a greatly misunderstood

subject. Cesare Cantù, in his *Histoire Universelle*, will clear up other points. Standard biographies of the great men of the time will also be found helpful. Remember the wonderful religious, artistic, and literary activity and fertility of the thirteenth century. It was a century of intellectual giants when Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas gave fixity to scholastic philosophy; when the universities with their teeming life were created and organized under the protection of the papacy; when the Miracle-Play and the Morality were enacted with all the solemn pomp and gorgeousness which the ingenuity of the Franciscan Friars could devise, and the devotion of the trade and craft guilds could furnish; when the Gothic cathedral rose in the great cities of France and Germany, a forest of stone embodying one of the sublimest conceptions of human genius; when national literatures began to make classic the language of the people; when song and story were crystallizing around the great truths of religion; when Vincent of Beauvais wrote his Encyclopædia, and Roger Bacon and Albert the Great placed physical science upon its true basis of experiment and observation; in a word, it was a century of noble aspiration and magnificent achievement. If you would form some conception of the intellectual life ofthat period, look through the volumes of the *Histoire Litteraire de la France*, which after more than sixty years' labor on the part of the immortal forty of the French Academy upon that one century, has not yet been

able to exhaust it. Note the whole library of volumes belonging to that period published in the *Patrologia* of Migne; afterwards take up the two bulky tomes of Echard and Quetif, giving a detailed list of the Dominican writers who distinguished themselves, turn to the five folios of Luke Wadding performing the same service for the Franciscan writers, and mark the enormous bulk of literature that emanated from these two orders alone. In the publications issued under the supervision of the Master of the Rolls, and by the early English Text Society in London; in the volumes of Muratori and Tiraboschi in Italy; in the volumes devoted by Flores and Masden to the literary history of the same period in Spain, you will get some slight inkling of the work done in that century, and you may then conceive all that teeming life and thought concentrated in the genius of Dante. That century is still our educator. St. Thomas molded for us, and indeed for all time, our philosophical and theological language; the Gothic cathedral is still the school of architects; Dante has for this age as wholesome a lesson as he had for his own.

III.

Having formed a clear conception of the historical background from which Dante looks out upon us, the student's next step is to familiarize himself with scholastic philosophy. This form of mediæval thought is intimately wrought into the *Divina Commedia*. It is the

groundwork on which figures what is highest and noblest in dogma and morals. Indeed the poem, from its first line to its last, embodies a complete treatise on morals. Nor is there a great truth of our holy religion that is not to be found embedded in the amber of its pages. "He anticipated the most pregnant developments of Catholic doctrine," says Mgr. Hettinger, "mastered its subtlest distinctions, and treated its hardest problems with almost faultless accuracy. Were all the libraries in the world destroyed, and the Holy Scriptures with them, the whole Catholic system of doctrine and morals might be almost reconstructed out of the *Divina Commedia.*" Therefore it is that Dante can be but ill understood by one not familiar with scholastic philosophy, especially with the *Summa* of St. Thomas Aquinas. Two eminent Jesuits, Fathers Cornoldi and Liberatore, have done much to show the intimate relations of Dante to the schoolmen; Father Cornoldi in his valuable edition of the text with notes, and Father Liberatore in the instructive monograph that he devoted to the poet. The eminent Dominican, Father Berthier, who is recognized as one of the greatest students of Dante living, is now issuing a sumptuous edition of the *Divina Commedia* in which nearly every line of the poem is traced back to a parallel passage in the writings of the Angelical Doctor.

Dante is not only a scholastic; he is also a mystic. There is a sense purely mystical and spiritual running

through his poem. His novitiate with the Franciscans was not misspent. He then learned how to commune with God in holy meditation; he then studied the different stages by which the soul ascends from the period of her conversion, through her state of purgation into the illuminative way, until she finally enters what masters of the spiritual life call the unitive state, where her will becomes one with the will of God in all things that can befall her in this life. And this whole course of spiritual life has been so clearly and beautifully traced through Dante's sublime poem as to merit for it the title of Divine. Therein, beneath the veil of allegory are portrayed the struggles of a soul snatched from the clutches of sin and passion and evil habit, through the trials and temptations of life, until she ascends to the fruition of union with the Divinity. Let us not think for a moment that Dante has in this delicate work blindly groped his own way; on the contrary, step by step he follows in the track marked out by St. Bonaventure, St. Bernard, and the Hugos of St. Victor's. Familiarity with spiritual life as based upon the writings of these great mystics will help us to appreciate this aspect of the *Divina Commedia.*

The poem of Dante is constructed according to the science of his day. Its whole machinery is based upon the Ptolemaic system of astronomy. How many there are who read the poem, for instance, oblivious of the fact that it is constructed upon an astronomical basis; that

every moment can be timed; that the days and hours spent in any of the three regions through which the vision bears him, may be accurately measured? And yet volumes have been written entirely upon this scientific aspect of the poem. Read, for instance, the painstaking observations of P. G. Antonelli, in Niccolo Tommaséo's three-volume edition, and you will conclude with the commentator that "Alleghiera has proved himself no less a geometrician than a poet." A most interesting study it is to trace the progress of the poet from that memorable Holy Thursday in 1301, when he enters the gloomy wood, all through the remainder of that week, and of Easter week, till on Low Sunday he ascends to the Empyrean. In the light of times and seasons you understand those outbursts of song drawn from the breviary, and much that would otherwise seem random proves to be intentional, and its full meaning becomes clear.

IV.

The poem of Dante was written under the influence of art in its highest ideals, and it in turn influenced art. Giotto and Brunelleschi, Ghiberti and Donatello, must ever be coupled with the name of Dante. Their masterpieces render more bright many a page in the *Divina Commedia.* Read that beautiful and touching passage in the *Paradiso* descriptive of St. Francis wedding poverty:

"A dame to whom none openeth pleasure's gate,
More than to death, was, 'gainst his father's will,
His stripling choice; and he did make her his,
Before the spiritual court, by nuptial bonds,
And in his father's sight: from day to day,
Then loved her more devoutly."

Afterwards study Giotto's frescos of the same subject in the church of St. Francis of Assisi, remembering that Giotto (1276-1336) was the friend of Dante, and that it is to him we are indebted for the portrait of the great poet which has been transmitted to us.

The student of Dante should have before him photographs or engravings of these and the other great allegorical frescos and paintings that have been preserved. There are the frescos of Simone Memmi, the friend of Petrarca, (1280–1344) in the Spanish chapel of Santa Maria Novella, Florence, interpreting the glories and triumphs of the Church militant over heresy. Note the important place occupied by St. Dominic and his disciples represented by keen-scenting greyhounds; note how those hounds chase the wolves; note above all how Benedict XI. accepts them to be the guardians and protectors of his flocks, and in the light reflected from those pictures read the following lines regarding the she-wolf that threatened to devour Dante:

* * * * * "This beast,
At whom thou criest, her way will suffer none
To pass, and no less hindrance makes than death,
So bad and so accursed in her kind,
That never sated is her ravenous will,
Still after food more craving than before.
To many an animal in wedlock vile
She fastens, and shall yet to many more,
Until that greyhound come, who shall destroy
Her with sharp pain. He will not life support
By earth nor its base metals, but by love,
Wisdom, and virtue, and his land shall be
The land 'twixt either Feltro."

Here we have a whole flood of light thrown upon what has hitherto been an obscure passage.[1]

Again, turn to Orcagna's frescos in the Campo Santo of Pisa. Orcagna (1325–1385) wrought out his Last Judgment and his Triumph of Death under the inspiration of Dante. The same is true of Pietro Lorenzetti's representation of the Fathers of the Desert. Before leaving Pisa, let us enter the church of St. Catherine; observe that splendid allegory of Traini, (civ. 13–14.) wherein St. Thomas Aquinas is represented as prostrating Averroës, and in the person of Averroës all error, by the bolt of truth.

[1] Father Berthier, O. P., follows Father Cornoldi, S. J., in regarding Benedict XI. as *il Veltro*. [Cfr. in connection with this passage Döllinger's Essay on "Dante as a Prophet," translated into English recently and issued as a portion of the volume, "Studies in European History."—J. H. M.]

When to these we add *La Disputà* of Rafaello and the sublime frescoings of Michelangelo—his Last Judgment and his wonderful allegory on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel—we possess a commentary upon the *Divina Commedia* that is more valuable than half the volumes that have been written. Charles Lamb tells us that Milton should be read within hearing of the deep and solemn tones of an organ. Dante should certainly be read within sight of these allegorical pictures that breathe his spirit, and are so many interpretations of his poem.

V.

The *Divina Commedia* palpitates with the politics of Dante's day. The poet spoke to his own age and his own Italy. He had a message for his times and for his country. His message was one of political regeneration as well as moral regeneration. We may not agree with his views; historical justice compels us to condemn the estimates he formed of many of his contemporaries; he was in some respects too fierce a partisan, and refused to see merit in an enemy or wrong in a friend, but we are in duty bound to become familiar with the personages of whom he speaks, and put ourselves at his point of view. All this implies an earnest study of contemporary events, and familiarity with the lives and politics of contemporary personages. Then shall we find that every epithet, every allusion, every

figurative expression applied to men, has a meaning that was understood and appreciated at its full value in Dante's day. He would be lost in the mazes of Dante's poem, who knew naught of the feuds between Guelf and Ghibelline, and which was which. Take the last five cantos of the *Purgatorio.* Mr. J. A. Symonds undertakes to analyze them, and finds them "archaic, mediæval, and obsolete," "so vast and to our taste so wearisome an allegory." We are not surprised. Mr. Symonds is too imbued with the spirit of the Renaissance—the spirit of cold form,—to understand and properly appreciate the earnest inspiration of the thirteenth century, still less the intense earnestness of Dante. The carefully-wrought allegory of these five cantos is insipid to Mr. Symonds because he missed their meaning. They embody Dante's doctrine upon the relations of the Papacy to the Holy Roman Empire. Both the Empire and the Papacy are of divine institution; both are the means by which, in the designs of Providence, the world is to be governed.

VI.

Here I would caution the student of Dante against another shoal that he is in danger of striking. It is not enough that he find a meaning for each allegorical expression in itself; the meaning must also harmonize with the other expressions, and be of one piece with them. It must throw additional light upon the sense of

the whole allegory. In the *Inferno* we find that Dante inflicts the same punishment upon treason to State that he does upon treason to Church. He places in the *Giudecca* those who were guilty of the murder of Cæsar with him who betrayed the Saviour.

> "That soul up there which has the greatest pain,"
> The master said, "is Judas Iscariot,
> With head inside he plies his legs without,—
> Of the two others who head downward are,
> The one who hangs from the black jowl is Brutus;
> See how he writhes himself and speaks no word,
> And the other who so stalwart seems, is Cassius."
> [*Inferno*, xxxiv. 60–67.]

This picture is in keeping with his conception of the union of Church and State making indeed two heads with but a single body.

Hence it is that Dante is to be studied with a careful eye to the exact word employed. The more literal the translation the more useful does it become for the student. Carlyle's prose version of the *Inferno*, and Butler's or Norton's prose version of the whole poem are indispensable. Of the translations in verse Longfellow's is the most literal, though it lacks at times grace and flexibility. His inversions are sometimes forced. Cary was thoroughly imbued with the spirit of Dante, and seldom missed the poet's meaning; but there is a Miltonic swell about his lines—I might say almost a Miltonic mannerism—that is not in accord with the scientific

precision of Dante's own style. Because of this precision no author suffers more by translation. Throughout the whole extent of his poem there is not a random word. He held every expression under complete control. Well might Dante himself say that "never for the sake of a rhyme had he said other than he meant to say." No literary monument has ever been so consistently realized. His is the masterly grasp of genius over words and forms of expression. As a model of style he ranks with his guide and master, Virgil. According as occasion requires, he is tender and pathetic, or harsh and severe, sweet, musical and elegant, or rude and strong, always suiting language to sense. He that would learn the mode of condensing great thoughts in words few and simple, should make a careful study of the *Divina Commedia.*

Nor is Dante to be overlooked as an educator. He who had wandered from university to university—who had been in Paris and sat at the feet of those who had themselves received the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas from his own lips; who had probably been in Oxford and passed from hall to hall in School street,—with his observant eye must have noticed differences in educational methods, and held to the best. And so, from the pedagogical point of view, a complete educational method may be constructed out of his great poem.

VII.

The student would now like to know the books that will best serve as an introduction to the study of Dante. Here I shall confine myself to those that are most accessible. Macaulay's brilliant essay on Dante is deserving of mention. It was one of his first literary achievements, and was actually the first note of praise introducing Dante to modern English readers. The essay is fervid and replete with enthusiasm, but lacks historical accuracy and critical discrimination. Dean Church published an essay on our poet in the *Christian Remembrancer*, January, 1850, and republished it in a separate form in 1879, under the title *Dante.* This essay gave impulse to the study of the great Florentine. It is a model piece of criticism. It is only lacking in one thing to reach the level of Dante's greatness, and that is, possession of the fulness of Dante's faith. This lack leads the Dean to a misunderstanding of the attitude of Dante towards the Church. Otherwise it is one of the most scholarly, reverent, and sympathetic studies of Dante that we possess in English.

Mr. J. A. Symonds in *A Study of Dante*, has given us a pleasing introduction replete with suggestive thoughts and happy remarks. But he leaves much to be desired. He attempts to present us only with the artistic side of the poem. Its philosophical depth is beyond his reach; he sometimes misses its allegorical meaning; he